

BARIO, LAND OF FERTILITY

Bountiful, Beautiful
Revista Ven America



Photo by: *tong teck ping*

On the north-eastern fringe of Sarawak, close to the state boundary of Sabah and the international border of Kalimantan, is a mountain range called the Kelabit Highlands. These peaks are home to a town called Bario. Although modest in size and population, Bario is fast becoming a big name in tourism, drawing visitors both near and far. A large part of the appeal of this land is what is produced from it, including rice, pineapple and salt.

These three commodities have become synonymous with Bario, gifting the town fame not just outside the state, but outside the country as well. However, the allure of Bario goes beyond its agricultural produce, as it exudes the good old fashioned cultural charm and breath-taking natural beauty that Sarawak is known for.



Photo by: planetborneotours.com

Bario sits on a plateau some 1,000 metres above sea level, making it one of the highest human settlements on Borneo Island. Its prime inhabitants are the Kelabit, the tribal people who are comfortable in the mountainous terrain of the geological range named after them.

In terms of headcount, the total Kelabit population is a fraction of other tribal groups in Sarawak with only an estimated 6,800 people today. Of this number, some 1,200 remain in the Bario highlands, while the rest have ventured to the outside world and settled elsewhere.

The Kelabit who stayed behind are mainly involved in agriculture, the primary driver of Bario's economy. They work hard to produce the yields with which Bario has found an unshakable association – Bario rice, Bario pineapple and Bario salt. The prefix in the form of the town's name is warranted as these products have earned their respective spot on supermarket shelves, commanding healthy demand.



Photo by: ohfishiee.com

Exclusive Grain

The elevated topography of Bario is a suitable environment in which Bario rice flourishes, and the town is surrounded by flat, verdant paddy fields as testament. Cool temperatures, fertile soil and generous helpings of water has made the rice, which is sweeter than other varieties and rich with mineral and vitamins, a generations-old fixture of Bario.

New farming technology has reinvigorated the rice fields, helping to increase output to satisfy mounting demand. Due to its sought-after taste and perceived health benefits, Bario rice is considered a premium variety that is placed above other rice types. Vacuum packed, this grain is being sold in markets as distant as Australia.



Photo by: *commons.wikimedia.org*

Pleasant Pine



Photo by: *Wazari Wazir/Flickr.com*

The favourable growing conditions that benefit the Bario rice is also a boon for another crop that has been grown in farms for generations, the Bario pineapple. Many surmise that the fruit gains its trademark sweetness because it is cultivated in the highlands without the use of special fertilisers, giving the Bario variety an edge over its lowland cousins.

Locals believe that in addition to its pleasant taste, Bario pineapples offer a host of benefits, including curing diseases such as gastric problems and helping to maintain youthfulness. It is no wonder then that the demand for the spiky fruit has spiked in recent years, with a majority of customers originating from within Sarawak.



Photo by: sarawarborneotour.com

Worth its Salt



Bario salt/Photo by: Wazari Wazir/flickr.com

Aside from grain and fruit, Bario salt is another product the town is famous for. What is so special about this salt? It comes not from sea, but from the ground! The salt is present in underground water, which is accessed at several salt springs near the town. These springs resemble water wells, where buckets are lowered into the shaft to retrieve the water, from which the salt is extracted over heat source via evaporation. The salt was then packed into bamboo tubes, which are dried and burned in a fire to produce salt sticks. Packaged in a traditional leaf package, the salt is a favourite of many who swear by its advantages over regular salt. High in minerals and iodine, it helps maintain health. It is also not as strong tasting as regular salt, and does not discolour food such as vegetables in cooking.



Map/ *Google.com*

Local Insight

To find out more about what Bario has to offer, we spoke to Julian Rang, Bario Guide Association Chairman, whose insider knowledge gives us a cursory yet detailed glimpse of this highland town.



Julio Rang/Photo by: *Sarawak Convention Bureau!*

Could you tell us about yourself?

I was born in Bario, and after a twenty year stint in Kuala Lumpur as an engineer in the semiconductor line, I moved back here last year for good. Aside from being the Chairman of the Bario Guide Association, I'm a farmer here.



Photo by: *friendsoftheorangutans.com*

What do you love about Bario?

My favourite aspects of Bario are its colourful culture, the sweeping agricultural landscape, and the natural scenery of our verdant tropical rainforest – we are adjacent to the Pulong Tau National Park. On top of those, there are other natural wonders as well, such as monolithic rocks. These geologist favourites have been gazetted as cultural sites by the Sarawak Museum.



The Ibans/Photo by: *Sarawak Tourism Board*

What do visitors usually say about Bario?

Visitors usually commend the hospitality of the Kelabit community here, and never fail to mention the spectacular greens of the paddy fields.

Could you detail some notable Bario events?



Photo by: *everfest.com*

There are three major events that take place in Bario. The first is Irau Nukenen, a three-day food festival that is held every end of July for the past 11 years, which highlights over 80 local dishes made from farm and jungle produce. The second event, occurring in May, is Runners Wild, which saw its inaugural run last year. This year, 60 participants took part in the race. Kebangkitan Rohani (Spiritual Revival) is our third significant event. It has been held every October for three days since 1973, and draws about 2,000 people, mostly nearby locals.

Where do you see Bario in five years?



Photo by: *Sarawak Tourism Board*

In my view, Bario has the potential to grow and become an agro-diversity hub, adding strength to the economy of the area. Additionally, I foresee increased human traffic in Bario, mostly in terms of tourist numbers. These added footfalls have to be monitored so as to not be a burden to the local residents and the Bario way of life. However, we always welcome visitors, and will upgrade the town's infrastructure – including the road network, communal amenities and telecommunications –accordingly to accommodate them.

Currently, we already have the eBario Telecentre, which is an ongoing Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) project to study sustainable development in a remote community using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). It offers education, e-government services, e-commerce, e-health, tele-medicine and personal communication services. The telecentre has netted many awards, including the recognition of Bario as one of the Top Seven Intelligent Communities 2001 by World Teleport Association.



Photo by: *Wikipedia*

How would you sum Bario up?

Personally, I would say that thanks to its multi-faceted appeal, Bario is the perfect place to stay! There are three daily flights from Miri that touch down at the quaint Bario Airport, although the more intrepid could opt for the adventurous off-road vehicle route into this picturesque highland town. Regardless of the mode of transportation, one thing is certain – the destination is well worth the trip. A lovely blend of natural and man-made marvels, Bario works its way up high on the list of must-visit places for those who set foot in Sarawak.



Bario airport/Photo by: *wheetheyouth.net*